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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; SCA/PPD, ECA, IIP, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NO VIRUSES (OR COCKROACHES) - POST CORRECTS
THE RECORD WITH WEBSITE, "KRONIKA TURKMENISTANA"

REFS: A) ASHGABAT 0336; B) ASHGABAT 0279

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Public Affairs Section has begun a productive dialog with the Turkmen opposition website that carried inaccurate information (Ref A) about post's Information Resource Center (IRC). This website also originated the erroneous, now famous, "cockroach" story (Ref B). "Kronika Turkmenistana" criticized the IRC's anti-virus policy -- along with some blatant inaccuracies -- as too intrusive and speculated that Turkmen intelligence was involved in monitoring visitors' Internet use through such a program. In a surprise to post, the website carried the PAO's response in full and in a respectful manner. This led to a more substantive dialogue with the website and hopefully provided readers with a more factual impression of the IRC. It also represents a rare opportunity to engage with the Turkmen opposition who frequently post questionable information or criticisms of Turkmenistan END SUMMARY.

WEBSITE INACCURATELY REPORTS ABOUT IRC

13. (U) On March 11, Turkmen opposition website "Chronicles of Turkmenistan" or "Kronika Turkmenistana" (www.chrono-tm.org) carried a Russian-language, inaccurate and speculative article about the Information Resource Center (IRC) of the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Section. The article, "Even the Americans have been infected by the virus of non-freedom/oppression," claimed that the IRC violates its visitors' rights and their privacy, through anti-virus scanning procedures. It also presumed that Turkmenistan's special services are in cooperation with the IRC to monitor the information and files that visitors use or access on the Internet (Ref A). The website carried the same article in English on March 14.

WEBSITE CARRIES PAO'S RESPONSE

14. (U) On March 13, the website carried the PAO's response letter in full and without changes. The letter clarified inaccuracies, justified the need for the existing anti-virus procedures, and shifted the focus towards providing "uninterrupted, uncensored, access to information." The website carried the same article in English on March 19. In addition, PAO sent off-the-record comments on the need for balance and verification of its stories, suggesting that Kronika contact the Embassy for comment before publishing

stories on U.S.-related topics.

WEBSITE CARRIES READERS RESPONSES TO THE LETTER OF PAO

15. (U) On March 18, Kronika published in Russian its readers' responses to the PAO's letter. Readers' concerns were focused on the IRC anti-virus policy, rather than conspiracy-theory accusations regarding intelligence activity. Some readers offered suggestions for easing the rules designed to promote anti-virus protection that they viewed as restrictive for users. The website carried the same article in English on March 22.

16. (U) On March 21, Kronika placed the PAO's further clarification of the policy, again turning the focus to the provision of Internet access and that the anti-virus policy supported that goal. No further articles or posting on the subject have appeared to date.

BACKGROUND ABOUT THE WEBSITE

17. (U) Taken from the website: "web-site "Chronicles of Turkmenistan" has been created by the independent, non-political human rights organization "Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights" with the support of international human rights organizations and individuals. It offers a possibility to exercise the right to freedom of word and self-expression. The name comes from analogy with "Chronicles of Current Events," Soviet-era reporting about human rights violations." A major contributor to the site is Farid Tukhbatullin, who also authors a blog linked to www.chrono-tm.org. He previously lived in Turkmenistan and now is in Vienna, Austria.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Post took a small risk by trying to provide both on and off the record information to a notoriously unreliable news

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source. However, the engagement in this case proved successful and could lead to opportunities for the Public Affairs Section to influence or shape some stories on the United States. This interaction could also serve as an example to fearful Turkmen authorities that engagement with foreign or opposition journalists might result in more balanced coverage. We would hope the back and forth on information would help to dispel the Turkmen government fears that the U.S. Government secretly controls opposition websites. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND